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STATE PASS HURRICANE MONITORING GROUP

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TAGS: [AEMR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [KFLO](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [AMGT](#) [MX](#)  
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SUBJECT: MGHH01: ACS Disaster Preparedness Pays Off During Hurricane Gustav

Ref: A) Kingston 262 B) Kingston 762

¶1. SUMMARY: Embassy Kingston's hurricane and disaster preparedness efforts were put to the test when Tropical Storm Gustav veered suddenly, hitting Jamaica directly and building to Category 3 strength as it struck the Cayman Islands. For the past year, the Mission's American Citizen Services (ACS) Unit has been procuring essential emergency equipment, assembling flyaway kits, combing through and updating warden system registrations and drafting protocols for hurricane emergencies. These advance planning efforts contributed to good communication and to ensuring the safety and security of American Citizens in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands as Gustav stormed through the Caribbean. END SUMMARY

¶2. Embassy Kingston has placed a major focus on disaster preparations for American citizens over the past years, especially since Hurricane Dean claimed lives and caused massive infrastructure damage to Jamaica in August 2007. Kingston safeguards consular and American citizen interests for Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, both of which host very large numbers of American citizen tourists during hurricane season. Embassy disaster readiness efforts paid dividends when the Gustav storm track suddenly swerved south overnight to pass directly over Kingston, claiming at least 13 lives and cutting a swath of landslides and damage across the length and breadth of Jamaica before building to Category 3 force as it hit the Cayman Islands.

¶3. But for a last minute course change that spared Kingston from the worst, the impact of 2007's Category 5 Hurricane Dean could have been catastrophic. Dean's close call spurred intensive lessons learned as well as analysis and continuous disaster prep efforts by Kingston's American Citizens Unit throughout this past year. (See Ref A.) Before the pavement was dry, we began acquiring and assembling emergency supplies for flyaway kits and pre-positioning at our Montego Bay and Cayman consular agencies. We completely revamped our wardens network, recruiting and training new wardens where needed and broadening our outreach capabilities to American citizen residents. We reached out to every major resort and hotel in Jamaica, building a database with emergency contacts, the numbers of Americans staying at each during the height of hurricane season, and hotel hurricane operations plans.

¶4. Pre-deployment of consular officers to the main tourist centers, Montego Bay and the Cayman Islands was a core lesson learned from Hurricane Dean and served us well. As Gustav approached Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, we had on-site reports of departure flights' status, hurricane preparations, deliberations by the Cayman Government on whether to call for evacuation, hotel occupancies and operations, and the pulse of American tourists' anxiety (or lack thereof) in advance of the hurricane. Our hotel database proved useful as we maintained regular contact with major tourist resorts throughout the emergency. We also transmitted two wardens' messages to AmCit residents and visitors in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands conveying hurricane updates and security information.

¶5. Fortunately, by landfall in Jamaica, the strength of the storm had dropped from a Category 1 hurricane to a less devastating but

still dangerous Tropical Storm with wind gusts of up to 90 MPH and massive rains. The Embassy closed on August 28; only core Emergency Action Committee (EAC) and ACS staff stayed to monitor the storm and coordinate American citizen response with our pre-deployed consular officers and consular agents. The Embassy EAC met throughout the day to discuss issues related to storm preparations and response. On Friday August 29, with torrential rains pounding the city, core EAC members monitored events and participated in Gustav Monitoring Group teleconferences from their residences.

¶16. No hurricane-related deaths or injuries of American Citizens have been reported in the Consular District. However, roads in many areas throughout Jamaica have been cut off by landslides and some Americans are still sheltering-in-place while roads are cleared. The Consular Section has spent the last two days rescheduling applicants whose visa appointments on August 28-29 had to be postponed. All applicants with emergency appointments have been scheduled to return on Wednesday, September 2, and we expect to accommodate all other delayed visa interview appointments by the end of this week.

¶17. Comment: Post greatly appreciated the regular conference calls of the Gustav Monitoring Group, which continued through the weekend. These calls provided an excellent, time-effective forum for obtaining the latest information on the ground and responding to questions from the Department. Given the possibility of telecommunications breakdown in hurricane scenarios, the key acquisition of two satellite phones provided a welcome measure of comfort when pre-deploying consular officers to outlying locations. While Jamaica and the Caymans were fortunate to avoid even worse devastation and larger loss of life in this instance, Gustav provided confirmation of the basic soundness of Embassy Kingston's

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hurricane and disaster preparedness efforts. We are now commencing lessons learned from Gustav in order to refine our readiness for future hurricanes.

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